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## Offshore watch

The Coast Guard's focused missions help protect fish and fishermen

By [DOUG FRASER](#)

STAFF WRITER

PROVINCETOWN - Dawn came as a light gray streak to the east as the Coast Guard cutter Escanaba slipped past Long Point lighthouse and into the Atlantic. Despite dawn's imminent arrival, the bridge remained darkened for night. Hushed commands passed between the officer on duty and the helmsman, both dusky silhouettes lit only by the red lights used for nighttime navigation.



■ Coast Guardsman Chad Johnson takes a boarding crew back to the cutter Escanaba after the Rose Marie inspection. Boarding teams aim to limit disruption to the fishing crew's work as they check on the boat's safety equipment and make sure fishing regulations are being followed.

One deck below, Commander Jim McPherson was in the wardroom eating breakfast. When the big cutter began the slow rise and fall that meant the ship was in the open water of the Atlantic, he telephoned the bridge and ordered the speed doubled to 10 knots.

The Big Dog was on the move.

The mission: To keep tabs on the New England fishing fleet, an industry with thousands of employees bringing in about \$1 billion a year.

It's a mission that has been on the decline for the last five years, especially since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 have tasked the Coast Guard with greater homeland security duties.

Still, fisheries patrol is an important duty, and one that will likely become more necessary in coming months as New England fishermen face the most stringent federal regulations they've ever seen. The temptation to cheat could be intense for some as they try to eke out a living.

The main way to make sure fishermen follow the law is for the Coast Guard to be on the water.

McPherson has no illusions that his ship can sneak up on anyone. At 270 feet long, the Escanaba is more than twice the size of any boat in the New England fishing fleet. Most fishing vessels' radar can mark and track the cutter's

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movements and spread the word to others.

Still, a combination of technological improvements and attitude changes by both fishermen and the Coast Guard have made at-sea enforcement of fisheries law a lot easier and more effective. It is presence, not surprise, that keeps people honest nowadays. That was evident as half of the dozen Gloucester vessels working the boundary of a large area closed to fishing checked in with the Escanaba without being contacted first, reporting they were available to be boarded.

One of those boats was the Rose Marie, which belched thick puffs of black smoke from its exhaust stack as its winch reeled in more than 1,000 feet of thick, twined cable attached to a net holding hundreds of pounds of gray sole. The cable whined as it was laid onto the reel under pressure, with an occasional loud twang, as if a junkyard vise was crushing a car.

You could forgive the Rose Marie's captain, Jerry Grillo, if he felt a lot like that car. In the past decade he's seen the economics of fisheries in decline. He's gone from catching 20,000 to 40,000 pounds of fish on a four-day trip to merely hoping he could get 16,000 pounds.

His crew size dropped from five to two, and the number of fishing days he is allowed dwindled from 265 to 70.

Come May, when new regulations in the New England groundfish management plan, known as Amendment 13, take effect, he'll be down around 52 days.

Times are tough, but they could be even tougher for Grillo and his crew if they were caught breaking the regulations.

"It's not worth it for us to cheat," said Grillo. The fines are too expensive, he said, and can destroy the fine line between profit and loss in a fishery with too few opportunities to fish.



■ Commander Jim McPherson says fishing boat safety is one of his key concerns on patrol. He was part of the crew that responded to the sinking of the Lonely Hunter in the fall.

### **Diverted attention**

With modern electronics, it has become a little easier to catch the cheaters. From the bridge, the Escanaba crew can track the fishing fleet working off Cape Cod. In a sophisticated control room behind the bridge, the crew can track military ships, aircraft and commercial traffic all the way to the Persian Gulf.

With nearly the entire scallop fleet and many of the larger groundfish vessels using electronic tracking devices called Vessel Monitoring Systems, or VMS, it is also a lot easier to police the boundaries of closed areas. That's a good thing because the Coast Guard is caught in multi-mission hell, with too few



■ Coast Guardsmen Quincy Lawton, left, Kevin Murphy and boarding team leader Ted Tarini inspect fishing gear on the Rose Marie, which was about 25 miles off the Cape coast near the Gulf of Maine.

ships, aircraft and personnel to do all the jobs it is now tasked with.

Last spring, a General Accounting Office report to Congress noted that coastal security missions increased from 2,400 resource hours during the first quarter of 1999 to 91,000 hours in the first quarter of fiscal 2002. Traditional missions such as drug enforcement and fisheries patrols have suffered. Fisheries patrols have seen a 38-percent drop in resource hours since 1998 and drug interdiction a 60-percent drop. Search and rescue and maintaining aids to navigation have remained roughly the same.

Coast Guard officials say the number of hours devoted to fisheries enforcement have been climbing in the past year, but will never reach what they were prior to Sept. 11.

"We've gotten away from a constant presence to more focused, random operations. We're getting out there when the fleet is out there and when the weather is at its worst," said Commander Greg Hitchens, the deputy chief of law enforcement of the Coast Guard's First District.

To maintain a presence on the fishing grounds, the Coast Guard mounts concentrated efforts when intelligence tells them it will be most effective. With a four-day break in the weather predicted for the week of Feb. 8, fishermen were out, and so was the Coast Guard.

Off Cape Cod, the 110-foot patrol boats Monomoy and Ridley and the 87-foot Hammerhead joined the Escanaba on fisheries patrol. A Coast Guard Falcon jet screamed by overhead, a Jayhawk helicopter passed by later, keeping an eye on fishing boats that crawled along the boundaries of the closed areas, catching fish that schooled in unprotected waters.

But the Hammerhead was soon diverted to escort a natural gas tanker into Boston Harbor. The Monomoy was soon busy escorting a fishing vessel with a fuel leak back to port, and the Ridley was called to aid a search-and-rescue mission.

"There have been studies that show that violations go up when boarding rates go down," Hitchens said. His agency did see that after Sept. 11 when they hit the fishing grounds pretty hard when the security threat dropped, and caught a lot of violators. But, he said, "pulsed" efforts have shown equal effectiveness in encouraging compliance.

In fact, these concentrated efforts have resulted in an upswing in the number of boardings, despite having fewer hours devoted to fisheries patrol. In the First District, which stretches from the Canadian border to New Jersey, there were 1,076 boardings last year compared with 878 in 2000.

Both Hitchens and McPherson say they believe enforcement would not be possible without the cooperation of fishermen.

"The vast majority of fishermen are not committing violations," Hitchens said.

### **Protecting lives**

Boarding fishing vessels is also about safety. As the captain of a large vessel that operates in what some considered the worst weather conditions in the world, McPherson said he has nothing but admiration for fishermen.



■ "It's not worth it for us to cheat," says fishing boat owner Jerry Grillo, center in red, during a recent Coast Guard at-sea inspection.  
(Staff photos by KEVIN MINGORA)

Earlier this fall, the Escanaba, battling 20-foot seas at night off Nantucket, with everyone "just holding on" came across a 120-foot scalloper, hauling up a load of shellfish, with two men working on deck. Just another day at the office for the fishermen.

But he is also aware of the 14 men who died while fishing in New England waters last year, the highest total in recent memory.

The Escanaba was the first boat on scene at the wreck of the Lonely Hunter in October, an incident that killed two of the boat's crewmen and is now under criminal investigation.

A flare and search lights lit up the debris field after the Lonely Hunter was run down and flipped over by a larger fishing vessel. The captain said he was sucked under twice, trapped under his sinking boat. When he saw a patch of light, he swam for it and survived by hanging onto an emergency radio beacon that popped to the surface and transmitted its location to rescuers.

"It was chilling hearing him describe it," McPherson said of his interview with the lone survivor, Capt. John Weckesser Jr.

That stark scene embodied the Coast Guard's mission as lifesavers and for McPherson impressed on him that at-sea fishing vessel boardings represent a chance to save lives by making sure safety gear, like those radio beacons, are kept up to date.

"It makes you feel a lot safer (knowing the Coast Guard is patrolling offshore)," said Gus Sanfilippo, 33, the captain of the Lilly Jean, an 80-foot-long steel-hulled dragger from Gloucester.

Sanfilippo knows the Coast Guard is more than just law enforcement. Several years ago, he was rescued while on a different vessel that nearly sank 150 miles offshore.

Every year he arranges for a voluntary dockside safety check of his survival gear by the Coast Guard. He also uses a VMS. The tracking device starts

broadcasting position and vessel speed and direction once it has passed a longitudinal line a few miles offshore. National Marine Fisheries Service personnel in Woods Hole and the Coast Guard then monitor the vessel's position throughout its trip. This is especially effective in policing closed areas, but can also be critical in helping rescuers locate the vessel during an emergency.

### **Cooperation, not interruption**

While some fishermen have tried to cultivate a more amiable attitude toward the Coast Guard and its patrols, some still recall a more antagonistic relationship.

"I really don't mind. They do their thing, and I do mine," said Grillo, after an Escanaba team boarded his boat.

But Grillo remembers when boardings meant a two- to four-hour interruption in the fishing day, and fishermen felt they were being treated like criminals.

"I've got a story for you," said Grillo. In 1981 or 1982, he said his boat was boarded by Coast Guardsmen at night. All five crewmen were ordered on deck, including his father who had been asleep in his bunk. Grillo claims one guardsman pointed a machine gun at his father, who didn't understand English, and ordered him to take his hands out of his pockets.

"My father starts yelling and screaming in Italian," he said.

Nowadays, the Coast Guard emphasis is on minimizing the disruption of work and being respectful of captain and crew while carrying out an inspection.

When a team of four Coast Guardsmen boarded the Lilly Jean 25 miles off Provincetown, Sanfilippo never even had to slow down as he towed a fishing net in 800 feet of water. The boarding team simply timed a cresting wave and stepped off their 19-foot inflatable craft and onto the fishing vessel's deck. Work continued on the boat as the team split into two groups, with one checking the safety equipment and the other running down a checklist of the regulations fishermen in the area are expected to comply with. The regulation checklist includes minimum fish sizes, limits on how much of each species they can catch, and a check on the size of the nets' mesh to make sure juvenile fish are not being caught and thrown back over.

"To be honest with you, I look it up. Even if I've done six boardings in a day, I look it up for every one," said Ted Tarini, leader of the Lilly Jean boarding team.

Regulations have become increasingly complex in the past decade in an effort to bring New England's fish stocks back from the brink of commercial extinction. Each fishing area has its own twist on the regulations, whether it's a different size mesh in the nets or a difference in the amount of fish that can be caught each day.

Fishermen have come to appreciate the Coast Guard keeping people honest, especially in enforcing the closure of thousands of square miles of prime fishing grounds to protect fish stocks.

"It's a lot harder to cheat today," said Sanfilippo. "That's why (the fishing) has gotten a lot better. Everybody respects the closed areas more today than years ago."

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